



objectives. We are now in a multipolar world with potential adversaries that could threaten the United States, our allies, and our partners with nuclear weapons and nonnuclear capabilities that could have devastating impacts.

The National Defense Strategy is clear that the most comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security is the PRC [People's Republic of China]'s coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences. The PRC is the most serious challenge to U.S. national security holistically. We have seen incredible growth in China's nuclear arsenal, and it shows no signs of slowing down. It has a bona fide nuclear triad, and its increasingly provocative rhetoric and coercive activity in the Indo-Pacific region threaten a free and open Indo-Pacific.

But it is not just a matter of the PRC. Russia continues to present a strategic deterrence challenge, posing an immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability. North Korea is also a growing concern. Although it doesn't have the capability or capacity of Russia or China, North Korea is expanding its nuclear capabilities and missile technology. It is also increasing its aggressive rhetoric and actions toward Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

Taken piece by piece, this situation is already a concern. But we must look at the whole and realize all three actors are increasing their levels of cooperation with one another. We recently saw China and Russia conduct a combined naval patrol that sailed near Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. We're also witnessing an expanding military partnership between Russia and the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea], where North Korea is agreeing to support Russia's war in Ukraine. These challenges will continue to grow and evolve and so will our capabilities. That's why integrated deterrence is so important; it brings together all military domains and instruments of power, along with those of our allies and partners, to deter the range of threats we face today and in the future.

An Interview with Anthony J. Cotton

Joint Force Quarterly: As the commander of U.S. Strategic Command [USSTRATCOM], how do you view the threats and challenges your command faces?

General Anthony J. Cotton: Our threats are not isolated to one command or

nation. These global challenges require a concerted effort to strengthen not only deterrence but also partnerships with our allies and partners. For the first time, the United States faces two major nuclear powers that could operate at any level or domain of conflict to meet their national

General Anthony J. Cotton, USAF, is Commander of U.S. Strategic Command.

JFQ: For many years during the Cold War, even during times of tension, the United States and Russia had a continuing dialogue on nuclear arms control, leading to several agreements that dramatically limited the numbers and types of nuclear weapons and delivery systems. How do you view the prospects for arms control agreements in the future, not only with New START but also with other states besides Russia?

General Cotton: USSTRATCOM's mission is to reduce the risks of strategic attacks on the United States, its allies, and partners. I view arms control as a complementary effort, seeking the same objective by reducing the number of

threats and enabling strategic stability dialogues with potential adversaries. Any arms control negotiations must address the reality of two major nuclear powers. As always, my command stands ready to support the Department of State.

JFQ: The pressure of a growing range of threats from several states as well as non-state actors has led to questions about how the current triad of U.S. nuclear forces, first fielded in the Cold War, addresses this different world. Could you discuss how the modernization of U.S. nuclear forces might shape the international security environment in the future?

General Cotton: It is important to state our legacy systems are safe, secure, effective, and credible. We're recapitalizing every leg of the nuclear triad and the corresponding nuclear command, control, and communications [NC3] architecture to ensure our continued ability to serve as a bedrock of national security. These long-term investments will ensure a predictable, stable, and efficient nuclear force for decades.

The B-21 Raider, Sentinel, our next-generation ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile], the new *Columbia*-class ballistic missile submarine, B-52 commercial engine replacement program, AGM-181 Long-Range Standoff missile,



Airmen from 90th Maintenance Group maintain and repair intercontinental ballistic missiles on alert status, December 18, 2019, within Francis E. Warren Air Force Base, as part of Air Force Global Strike Command (U.S. Air Force/Abbigayle Williams)



Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine USS *Louisiana* transits Puget Sound following 41-month engineered refueling overhaul at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility, February 9, 2023 (U.S. Navy/Brian G. Reynolds)

and the next-generation nuclear command, control, and communication systems represent an era of significant transformation of U.S. nuclear forces. Our deterrence will only strengthen as we transition to these new systems that will be even more capable and synchronize our capabilities. The modernization of the nuclear triad, the weapons complex, and the infrastructure is critical to not only our nation's security but the security of our allies and partners as well.

JFQ: Can you discuss the importance of the overall modernization effort and your ability to sustain support from the Services

over the next decade to field those new systems, given the pressures each faces with other modernization requirements?

General Cotton: Modernization is not a matter of “Can we?” It is a matter of “We must.” Our nation’s security, and the security of our allies and partners for whom we provide extended deterrence, depends on it. This is a once-in-a-generation evolution, so we’re not just setting ourselves up for success; we are creating the new foundation for the next generation.

We’re modernizing all legs of the triad at the same time. This includes resourcing, manpower, delivery, infrastructure, and support facilities. We are working with

our Service partners to ensure alignment across the board, so our legacy systems remain effective as we transition into the modernized systems. We are spending an incredible amount of time to ensure we do not miss a step in the transition process. The Navy and Air Force are watching their efforts closely because they’re the ones that present forces to me, which I present to the President, as required.

JFQ: What is your assessment of USSTRATCOM’s ability to gain and maintain situational awareness now that U.S. Space Command and U.S. Space Force have been established?

General Cotton: The situational awareness of USSTRATCOM is strong due to the collaboration within the Department of Defense, specifically with U.S. Space Command and U.S. Space Force. For example, the Space Force's overhead persistent infrared satellites and ground-based radars provide strategic and theater missile warning. Combatant commands receive this information for awareness and conduct analysis and assessments to understand the strategic and tactical implications of space-related developments. Moreover, I look forward to the Next-Generation Overhead Persistent Infrared program, which will enhance our nation's situational awareness capabilities.

JFQ: *With the episodes of threats of nuclear weapons from Russia during its war on Ukraine and from the continuing missile launches from North Korea, how has your command worked with allies, partners, and neighboring states to reassure their governments of U.S. support to help reduce their defense concerns?*

General Cotton: Alliances and partnerships are key to protecting the rules-based international order. The strength of our alliances and partnerships gives us the asymmetric advantage that our competitors do not enjoy. For example, in 2023, we saw the first SSBN [ballistic missile submarine] port visit to South Korea in 40 years, an SSBN port visit to the United Kingdom, the first B-2 deployment to Iceland, a B-52 deployment to Indonesia, multiple bomber task force missions in the European and Indo-Pacific regions, and countless exercises. I believe these and other examples of assurance missions bolster our deterrence efforts around the world.

In addition to these operations, I recently had the opportunity to visit the Republic of Korea and Japan, where I met with senior military and government leaders to reaffirm, face-to-face, our commitment to extended deterrence.

We have liaison officers from Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom, all of whom work

closely with us daily. It garners trust among alliances and creates relationships that are key to integration and collaboration.

JFQ: *Could you discuss the growing challenges of cyber threats and the ability to assure intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance information flows to support your forces and how the other combatant commands, particularly U.S. Cyber Command, help USSTRATCOM achieve situational awareness?*

General Cotton: Cybersecurity is not static. Adversaries and bad actors constantly evolve their practices, which is a continual concern. However, it goes back to the regular collaboration that happens at the combatant command level and at all levels in every Service. I speak with General [Paul M.] Nakasone [commander of U.S. Cyber Command, director of the National Security Agency/ chief of the Central Security Service] regularly, and our J6 directorate, which maintains USSTRATCOM's command, control, communication, and computer systems. Also, our Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications Enterprise Center, which oversees the department's NC3 enterprise, works with U.S. Cyber Command often to ensure we remain ready and capable. Cybersecurity is interwoven in everything that we do.

JFQ: *Leadership at your level depends on the people who work for you. Given the various impacts of demographic trends in the United States and the frequent reports of shortages in qualified recruits for the Services, could you give us some of your insights into how you attract the military and civilian talent needed to meet your mission?*

General Cotton: Leadership at all levels, from the squadron to the combatant command, depends on a talented workforce. It is no secret that recruiting numbers are down, but America's military strength is built on a foundation of exceptional people—both military and civilian. Attracting talent to meet our nation's strategic deterrent mission is

a top priority, and we continue taking steps to ensure we have the right force for the future.

We are engaging talent where they are—at think tanks, on college campuses, at military units around the world—and having conversations about the critical work being done at the command. We are reaching people at local job fairs, advertising available positions on our social media platforms, and directly hiring qualified personnel for specific roles. The Omaha area is a great place to live and work, so we routinely partner with local government, civic, and civilian leaders in the greater Omaha metro community to highlight how the area is a leader in quality of life and national security.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the all-volunteer force, and for 50 years, our nation has been in good hands, and we will continue to be in good hands. We have no option.

The men and women of USSTRATCOM are the foundation for the capabilities that underpin our nation's strategic deterrence, and they do this in an environment that continues to grow even more complex and challenging. If I issue an intent, the Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen, Guardians, and civilians within the nuclear enterprise will complete the mission. The reason I know that is due to the extraordinary leaders we have. From the most junior to the most senior, I trust all of them in their abilities to execute.

We are all ambassadors of the military, the command, and the mission. In that sense, we are all recruiters, so the shortfall is on us. We need engaged, skilled, and dedicated people to continue to join the nuclear enterprise, so it is clear we need to share our experiences. It is a matter of getting out in our communities, talking with our peers in the Services, and explaining the what and why of the mission—and why Omaha, Nebraska, is such a great place to serve. **JFQ**